

TeleGuide



Including Proposal for QUBE

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Preface

This 'guide' is an attempt to outline aspects of my *Proposal for QUBE* project and to discuss some of the basic issues it may raise concerning telecommunications and visual arts practice. Although the structure of the book is based on QUBE (a 'two-way' cable-TV system in Columbus, Ohio) my primary concern is not this system *per se*, but the broader implications of two-way communication.

It may be interesting to note that almost a half-century has passed since Bertolt Brecht's proposal to change the apparatus of radio from its sole function as a distribution medium to a vehicle of communication. While this two-way send/receive capability has been technically feasible from the beginning, this kind of media interaction remains virtually nonexistent despite the recent reports in the press that "Viewers are Talking Back to Their TV Sets."

Mass media is not mass communication. Communication, by its nature, is a two-way proposition and in order to be effective must take place between people of common concerns and interests. The medium is not the message. It's not the medium that is most important but the conscious implementation of these tools for access to significant information as well as a means for communication and individual expression.

Peter D'Agostino

To Deirdre

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This is because these systems have largely been used for the benefit of the center and not as two-way streets. Today, unchecked mass communication bullies and shouts humanity into



**... should ultimately be
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lated by the center."**

TeleText

Paul Valery's prediction that "one day we shall be supplied with visual or auditory images that would appear or disappear by a simple movement of the hand" has long since been realized. As we approach the so-called "information revolution," access to new technology such as computer terminals linking telephones and television is becoming more widely available.

Teletext and *viewdata* are examples of two kinds of systems that provide information in the form of words, numbers, and charts displayed on a television monitor. Transmitted by broadcast TV signals *teletext* provides for viewer retrieval of information whereas *viewdata*, using telephone or cable-TV lines offers an 'interactive' component: two-way send/receive capability. Although the possibilities are wide and varied, (*teletext*, for example is being used for a captioning project for the hearing-impaired) both systems are primarily considered for applications in business and consumer services such as shopping, paying bills, and banking. In fact, many of these services are presently available on the British *Prestel* and Canadian *Telidon* systems.

While this wired "information society" is being discussed within the framework of consumerism and technological innovation, minimal emphasis has been placed on more direct forms of communication. In order for these systems to have a significant social or cultural value, they must first be decentralized and permitted to function interactively, like a telephone.

"The telephone system is the most completely decentralized and fully user-controlled public communication system ever invented, the only one in the world that allows the user to control the time, place, and content of message production and distribution."*

By combining the qualities of the telephone with the visual capacities of television and the storage capabilities of computers, these 'text' or 'data' systems could provide individuals or groups with a means for private (one-to-one) or public (mass) communication.

*Gene Youngblood "The Mass Media and The Future of Desire," *Co-Evolution Quarterly*, Winter 1977/78





TeleNews

Monday, October 9, 1978, Columbus, Ohio. An appearance by Miss Columbus in the Columbus Day parade is front page news in the *Columbus Citizen Journal*. The local TV news also covers the story and the national news programs may select it from the wire services to serve as filler to symbolize the holiday.

This is, of course, only one example of the superficiality of most news coverage. The role of television news as a form of entertainment and diversion is well documented in Edward Jay Epstein's book, *News From Nowhere*. Beginning with a quote by Richard Salant, former president of CBS News, the book also deals with the news industry's attempts to appear impartial and objective:

"Our reporters do not cover stories from *their* point of view. They are presenting them from *nobody's* point of view."

This denial of viewpoint or ideology in presenting news information may, to a certain extent, be equally true for *Izvestia* or the *New China Agency* as it is for UPI or CBS and is exemplified by Walter Cronkite's sign off on the evening news: "*That's the way it is. . .*" Yet the interpretations of the events of the day by these divergent sources become more ideological as the issues become more significant.

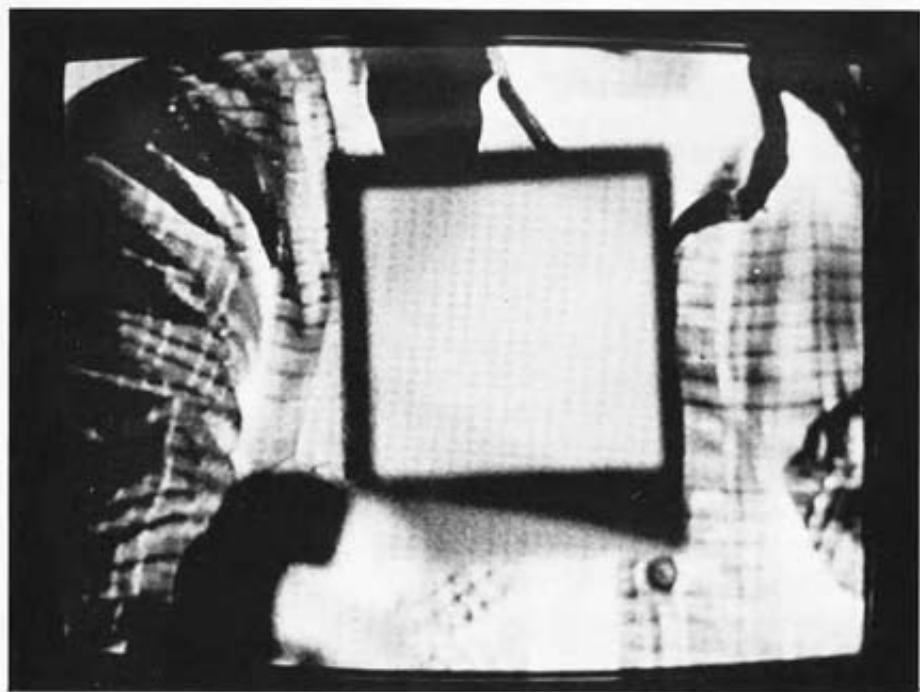
"There are no facts, there are only interpretations."—Nietsche

Will expanded coverage, such as that proposed by some cablecasters for all-day continuous news, change this situation?

"Perhaps it all doesn't matter as long as the viewer keeps viewing in comforting numbers. Perhaps it's safer and easier to keep things equally insignificant in the 'real world' of television."*



*John J. O'Connor, "TV: 'Real World' Proves to Be Curiously Elusive," *New York Times*, September 7, 1972



TelePhoto

Taking an "instant" photograph and watching it develop on a television screen can be a slow and tedious process. What seems to be quick in one medium can appear to take an unbearably long time in another. The live and instantaneous transmission of sound and image is a unique quality of television.

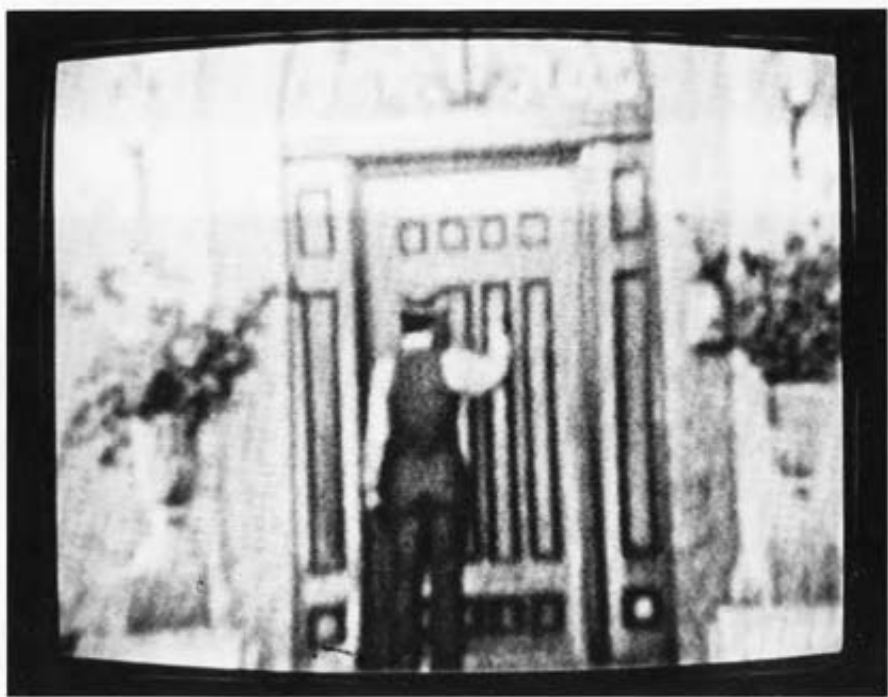
In *On Photography*, Susan Sontag cites TV's drawbacks as a visual medium in relation to photography: "Photographs may be more memorable than moving images because they are a neat slice of time, not a flow. Television is a stream of underselected images each of which cancels its predecessor. Each still photograph is a privileged moment turned into a slim object that one can keep and look at again."

The relationship of still and moving images is the subject of my work on "the photographic model."* During a slo-scan transmission between Vancouver and Dayton, Jo-Anne Birnie Danzker sent the following message in response to this work: "ALPHA is a series, a translation of film into a series of stills—SLO-SCAN is a serial, a translation of event into a series of stills."

The fact that still photographic images can also be transmitted via broadcast or telephone lines is not a new phenomenon. Telephoto and wirephoto processes have been employed in the news industry for many years. As systems such as Slo-Scan, TeleFax, and others become more widely available, it remains for practitioners to develop significant content for the applications of the electronic transmission of photography.



*ALPHA, TRANS, CHUNG—a photographic model: *Film, Semiotics and Interpretation*, Peter D'Agostino, WSU/NFS Press, 1978.



TeleFilm

The basic arguments concerning the differences between film and television usually center on their formal properties and the context in which they are presented.

Two classic works of reflexive cinema that attempt to define the nature of the film experience and some of its cultural implications are Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera* and Keaton's *Sherlock, Jr.* (*The Projectionist*). Through his Kino-Eye (Camera-Eye) concept, Vertov's intention was to create a documentary to decode the reality of everyday life into cinematic form to raise the consciousness of the audience in post-revolutionary Russia: "Only consciousness can fight the sway of magic. We need conscious men not an unconscious mass submissive to any passing suggestions." While Keaton's comedy parodies the movies, it also reveals an ideology of control exhibited in the illusionistic devices of the cinema and depicts the futility of attempting to interact with it as life experience.

A recent work especially written for television which integrates aspects of film and the context of its presentation on TV is Samuel Beckett's *Ghost Trio*.

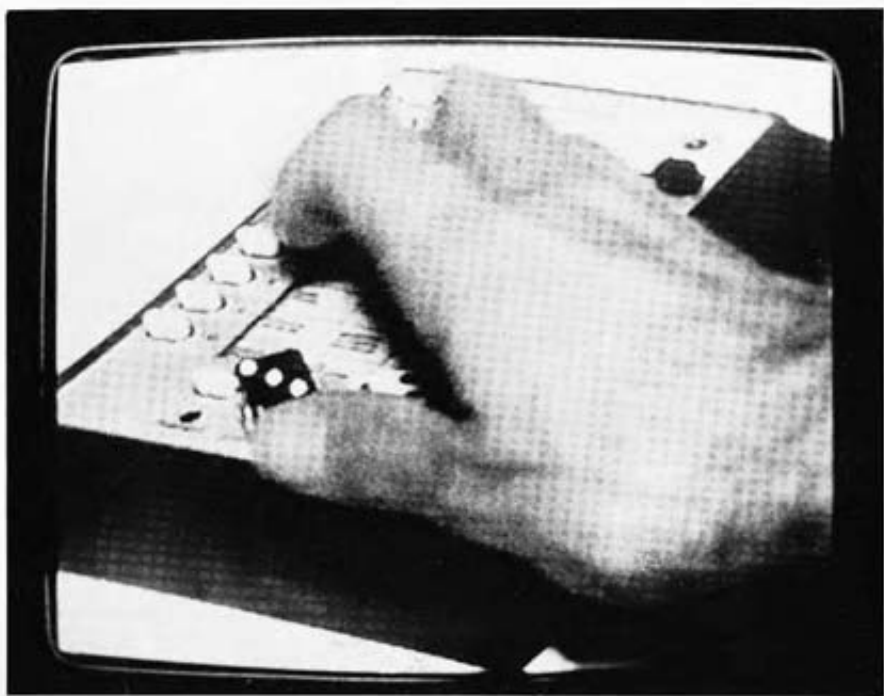
"The design and structure of *Ghost Trio*, a box for 'the box' remained unimpaired by this use of film—whose greater depth, tonality, and resolution befitted the precision of Beckett's written instructions—while re-transmission through video befitted the conception and structure and view(point) of the work."*

Conceived as a video-play, *Ghost Trio* contains three frames, one within another, like a Chinese box: the outer frame is the television screen itself, the next plane is that which is perceived in the visual narrative of the protagonist, and the interior plane exists within his mind.

The content and reflexive qualities of these and other works may provide a framework for discussing the distinctions of film and video as well as the compatibility of both mediums.



*Peter Gidal, "Samuel Beckett's *Ghost Trio*," *Artforum*, May, 1979



TelePerformance

Referring to the relationship between television and video art, David Antin has called TV "Video's Frightful Parent." Sharing the same medium with commercial broadcasting, video art, however, generally does not get on the public airwaves (except for relatively few instances), but usually takes the form of installations, live performances or actions, and videotapes. So although the TV industry has, for the most part, developed the hardware, the artist's work in this medium is generally not referred to as television. In a world where real events and media events are often indistinguishable, teleperformance can rely on its artifice, the artificiality of its own making, or it can serve as commentary of a given situation to develop its context.

"You jump around. You bounce. You *play* QUBE."

My TelePerformance is a response to the QUBE two-way cable TV system and its "interactive" console, the apparatus with five response buttons. Operating on the level of a TV game show, there's no significant participation in this system. So the game I've devised is played with five dice. I roll the dice and change the channel of my television set. There's no choice. It's simply a chance operation.

I'm *playing* QUBE—a metaphor for a game played in the early 1980's, in the age of electronic transmission, when participation was defined as a game with five "responses."



Proposal for QUBE

"It's those blank TV and movie screens that interest me most. When they're turned off, there's never a trace—no evidence of what has transpired. Their effects on consciousness is only a matter of literary speculation."¹

Proposal for QUBE was presented as part of a series of one-person exhibitions, titled "Six in Ohio," at Ohio State University's Sullivant Gallery, October 20-November 11, 1978.

Designed as a video installation piece, the videotape incorporated in the work was scheduled to be cablecast on QUBE prior to the exhibition.

QUBE, as you may know by now, is the first commercial application of two-way "interactive" cable-TV technology. Located in Columbus, Ohio, home of the college football's Buckeyes and Woody Hayes, the team's former controversial coach, this city is also a major consumer test-market for products and surveys.

The "interactive" system available to QUBE subscribers takes the form of a console attached to the television set that enables the home viewer to "participate" in selected programs by pushing one of five "response" buttons. (In a recent program titled "How Do You Like Your Eggs?" the five buttons stood for *scrambled*, *poached*, *sunny-side up*, *soft-boiled*, and *hard-boiled*.) Once activated, the console feeds a central computer and the results of the home response are flashed on the screen. (Here forty-eight percent of the homes had pressed the *scrambled button*.) This is how viewers are "talking back to their television sets."

For my gallery exhibition, two cubicles were built: one, a viewing space for the continuous video playback. Adjacent to it was an exhibition space for two sets of panels displaying "Quotes to" and "Quotes from" QUBE.

The quotations "from QUBE" had appeared in the national press and were primarily responsible for generating a highly utopian attitude concerning "two-way" cable

Quotes from QUBE

"... the name QUBE doesn't stand for anything, but was chosen because it rhymes with "tube" and because it suggests "something that is distinctive and futuristic without being scary."²

"We're bambambam. You jump around. You bounce. You play QUBE."³

Quotes to QUBE

"It is generally believed that modern communication systems must inevitably destroy all local cultures. This is because these systems have largely been used for the benefit of the center and not as two-way streets. Today, unchecked mass communication bullies and shouts humanity into silence and passivity. Artists everywhere are losing their local audiences, put out of countenance by the tireless electronic systems manipulated by the center."⁴

in Columbus; the quotations "to QUBE" were an attempt on my part to create a dialogue raising some of the obvious questions concerning this kind of system and its possible application.

Proposal for QUBE was conceived as a theoretical model of two-way communication based on a dialogue. The response mechanism in the form of the dialectic employed in "Quotes to" and "from" QUBE was extended into the content of the videotape and the method in which it was to be cablecast.

The tape contains five segments ranging from theoretical concerns to everyday events and are in the form of: a text, a newspaper, a photograph, a film, and a video performance. After sampling a portion of each of the five segments, the home audience would, by the consensus of their response, determine the sequencing of the tape and see the results of this process. (Five segments—1 through 5—would yield 120 possible variations for editing the final tape.) Aside from the apparent novelty of producing a videotape edited by a public opinion poll, I wanted to confront two central issues relative to communication and information systems—namely, feedback and ideology.

"Feedback," using Norbert Weiner's definition, is "a method of controlling a system by reinserting into it the results of its past performance," a learning process with the ability "to change the general method and pattern of performance."⁵ The present methods employed by QUBE limits feedback to the mere illusion of participation. As in McLuhan's *The Medium is the Message*, participation is defined solely by the formal properties of the medium—rather than its content: "The mosaic form of the TV image demands participation and involvement," while "Literacy in contrast conferred the power of detachment and non-involvement." Applying McLuhanesque jargon in statements such as "We are entering the era of participatory as opposed to passive television."⁶ QUBE seems to be presenting its unique apparatus—the computerized console—as its content. "What we have here is an electronic superhighway. You name it—we can do it."⁷

A problem relative to this attitude is expressed in QUBE's policy towards public access: "Our local shows in effect is public access, but we organize it."⁸ Redefining access on these terms, in fact, limits public participation.

This pre-packaging of media access provided by QUBE with its "newspeak" terminology such as "Qubit" and "Qubsumer" reminds me of a scenario from Ray Bradbury's novel *Fahrenheit 451* which concerns a futuristic two-way TV system:

"They mailed me my part this morning. I sent in some box-tops.
They write the script with one part missing. It's a new idea."
"And then they go on with the play until he says, 'Do you agree to that, Helen?' and I say, 'I sure do! Isn't that fun, Guy.'"

Don't send in any box-tops. Active participation is essential. However, each media or method has its own ideological implications. The apparatus itself creates the first level of meaning. Additional information like 'Helen's response' can be virtually meaningless. Demystification is the first step. What is two-way cable TV? How is it being programmed?

Although *Proposal for QUBE* was scheduled for cablecasting on October 13, 1978, it was canceled, I was told, due to "special programming" on the station. On November 22, after waiting a month, I sent a letter to QUBE requesting a new date for my program. As we approach the beginning of March, 1979, I'm still waiting for a "response."⁹





Postscript

It's January, 1980. I'm sitting here in my studio in Yellow Springs, Ohio, looking into a gray winter sky and reflecting on my past experience with QUBE. Some things have changed since the preceding comments. QUBE has undergone some personnel changes, including a new program director. I also read of a recent collaborative project with WGBH, Boston, and of SoHo Television's four-week series of artists' programming on QUBE.

On the other hand, my "theoretical model" for two-way cable was expanded and later shown at the Long Beach Museum. My present concerns have shifted somewhat to certain practical aspects of two-way cable transmission. Additional research into the development of a "practical model" has led me to the following information regarding a community-based two-way cable system. The project was undertaken by New York University and three neighborhood communication centers (NCC) in Reading, Pennsylvania, with a grant from the National Science Foundation. Its premise was to "demonstrate the potential for communication technology to reinforce community consciousness."¹⁰ Components of the project included: two-way interactive capability, public initiated programs from neighborhood facilities, and an emphasis on serving distinct sub-groups within the population—in this case, senior citizens. After the initial experimental period, a non-profit corporation, Berks Community TV (BCTV) was formed to assume responsibility for the system. Reports indicate it is still operational and growing.

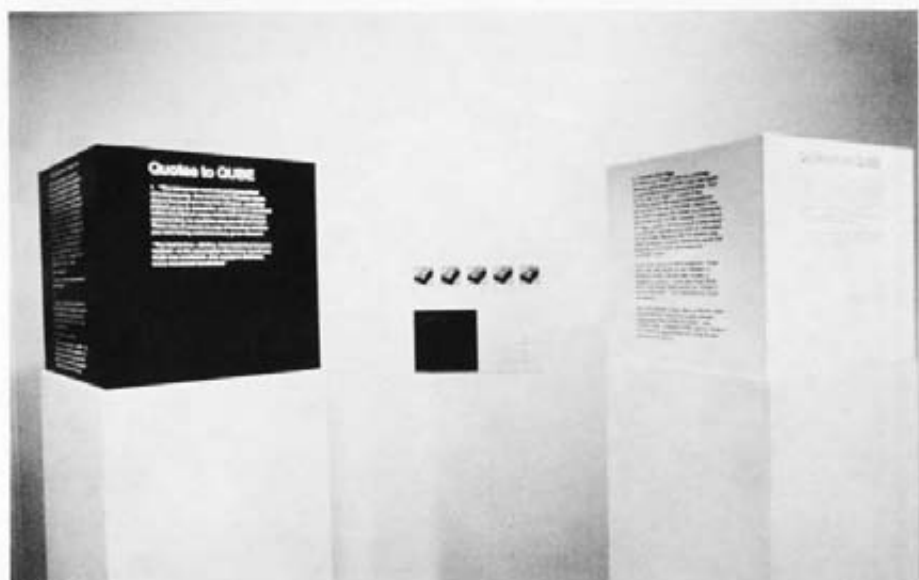
The Reading experiment is clearly a model for serving some important community needs. While at QUBE, can the recent attempts in experimental arts programming lead the way for more community involvement? Some serious questions remain.

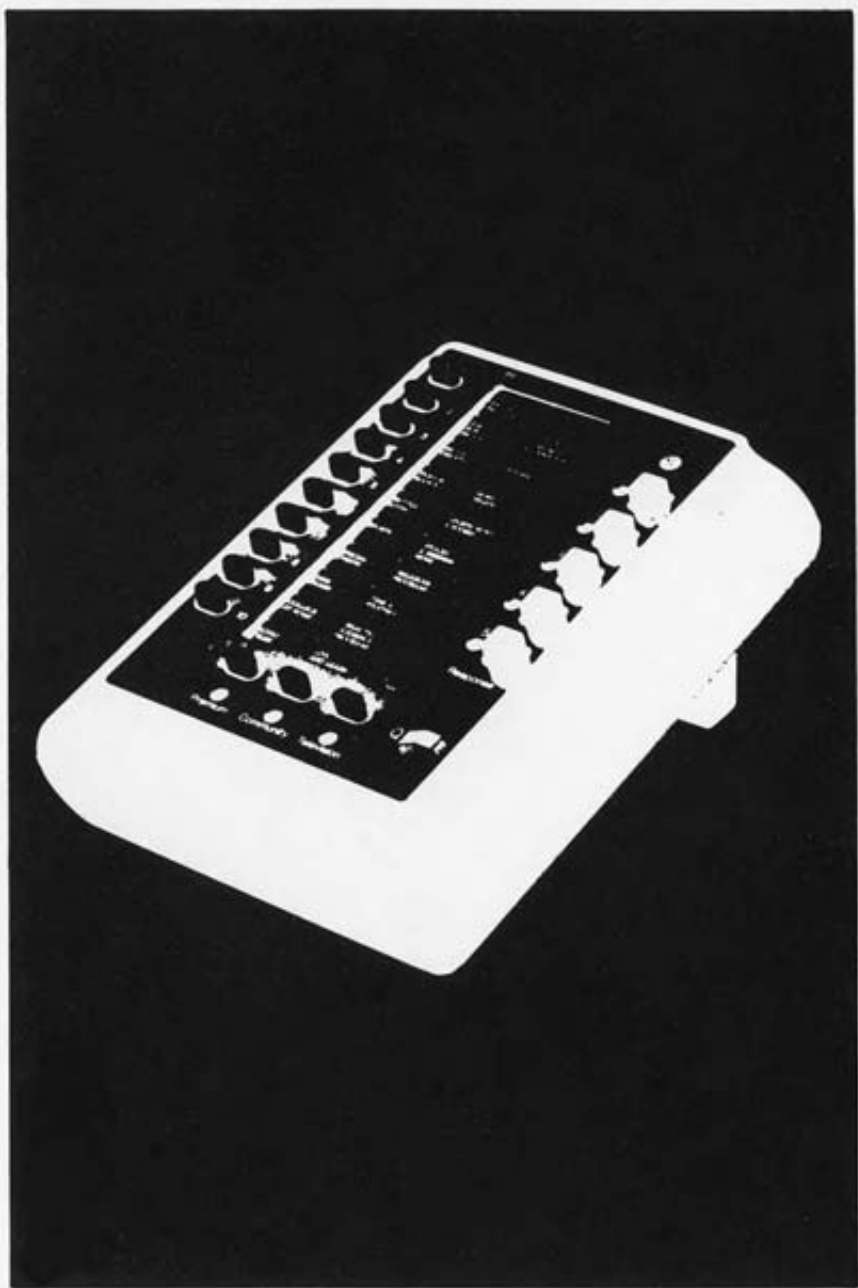
"We can be precise. The factors are
in the animal and/or the machine the factors are
communication and/or control both involve
the message. And what is the message?"¹¹

Stay tuned?

Notes

1. Part of my statement for the catalog, *Six in Ohio*, Ohio State University, Gallery of Fine Art, 1978.
2. From a statement by QUBE president Lawrence B. Hilford in "Can't Stand the Show? TV Gadget Lets Viewers Rule," *Detroit Free Press*, December 1, 1977.
3. From a statement by QUBE programming vice-president Harlan Kleiman in "Brave New World of Television," *New Times*, July 24, 1978.
4. Alan Lomax, "Appeal for Cultural Equity," *Journal of Communication*, Spring, 1977.
5. Norbert Weiner, *The Human Use of Human Beings*.
6. From a statement by Warner Cable chairman Gustave M. Hauser, "Talking to the Tube," *Newsweek*, December 5, 1977.
7. From a statement by Gustave M. Hauser, "Brave New World of Television," *New Times*, July 24, 1978.
8. Gustave M. Hauser, "Two-Way Cable Poised for Major Test in Columbus," *Broadcasting*, November 21, 1977.
9. An earlier version of this work originally appeared in *LAICA Journal*, No. 24, Sept./Oct., 1979.
10. Mitchell L. Moss, "Two-Way Cable Television: A Community Communication System," *Public Telecommunications Review*, Vol. 6, No. 6, Nov./Dec., 1978.
11. Charles Olson, "The Kingfishers."





Quotes from QUBE

1. "Television was the very first step in home viewing and QUBE is the next step, the giant step in television's sophisticated evolution," says QUBE President Lawrence B. Hilford. Hilford said the name QUBE doesn't stand for anything, but was chosen because it rhymes with "tube" and because it suggests "something that is distinctive and futuristic without being scary."

2. "We're bambambam," says QUBE programming vice-president Harlan Kleiman, "You jump around. You bounce. You play QUBE."

1. "Can't Stand the Show? TV Gadget Lets Viewers Rule," *Detroit Free Press* December 1, 1977.

2. "Brave New World of Television," *New Times* July 24, 1978.

Quotes to QUBE

1. "The telescreen received and transmitted simultaneously. Any sound that Winston made, above the level of a very low whisper, would be picked up by it; moreover, so long as he remained within the field of vision which the metal plaque commanded, he could be seen as well as heard. There was of course no way of knowing whether you were being watched at any given moment.

"You had to live—did live, from habit that became instinct—in the assumption that every sound you made was overheard, and, except in darkness, every movement scrutinized."

3. "We are entering the era of participatory, as opposed to passive, television," pronounces Warner Cable chairman Gustave M. Hauser.

4. "What we have here," says Hauser, "is an electronic superhighway. You name it—we can do it."

5. "The variations are endless," says Mr. Hauser. "We're soliciting, co-producing, stimulating and begging for material." To help organize the community programming, Warner has hired Michael Dann, former vice-president of television programming for CBS.

6. ". . . *Columbus Alive* and other local shows which Mr. Hauser says 'in effect is public access, but we organize it'."

3. "Talking to the Tube," *Newsweek* December 5, 1977.

4. "Brave New World of Television," *New Times* July 24, 1978.

5. "Columbus Viewer Will Take Part in Programs when Two-way TV Service Begins Late in Year," *Wall Street Journal* August 10, 1977.

6. "Two-way Cable Poised for Major Test in Columbus," *Broadcasting* November 21, 1977.

2. "It is generally believed that modern communication systems must inevitably destroy all local cultures. This is because these systems have largely been used for the benefit of the center and not as two-way streets. Today, unchecked mass communication bullies and shouts humanity into silence and passivity. Artists everywhere are losing their local audiences, put out of countenance by the tireless electronic systems manipulated by the center."

7. Ron Giles is prepared to have people tell him to shut up. In fact, if that's what they want, he'll be more than happy to oblige. Giles is co-host and producer of *Columbus Alive*, a two-hour magazine show set to debut on QUBE this evening at 6. And his feelings are: Give the viewers what they want when they want it

Giles calls it "democratic television." And he and co-host Susan Goldwater will be using it to shape what *Columbus Alive* will become in order to suit those who are going to view the program Monday through Friday each week.

3. "Television technology is inherently antidemocratic. Because of its cost, the limited kind of information it can disseminate, the way it transforms the people who use it, and the fact that a few speak while millions absorb, television is suitable for use only by the most powerful corporate interests in the country. They inevitably use it to redesign human minds into a channeled, artificial, commercial form, that nicely fits the artificial environment. Television freewayizes, suburbanizes and commoditizes human beings, who are then easier to control. Meanwhile, those who control television consolidate their power."

8. A Question About Eggs

For half an hour on each of the four evenings, television game-show host Bill Cullen was master of ceremonies for a locally-produced show "How Do You Like Your Eggs?". A panel of four Columbus people was asked simple questions, such as that in the title of the show. Viewers were then asked to register their answer by pressing the appropriate button on their consoles. *In the case of the "eggs" question, the five console buttons stood for scrambled, poached, sunny-side up, soft-boiled, and hard-boiled.* Moments after the question was asked the Warner computer flashed the results that 48 percent of the homes had pressed the "scrambled" button.

Some of the more provocative questions: "If you were a film, what would you be, a Western, a Hitchcock thriller, a Woody Allen comedy, a musical, or a porno?". "If you were Snow White, which of the Seven Dwarfs would you choose to have an affair with?". (The overwhelming choice was Bashful.)

One of the selected viewers, Mary Jo Sbrochi, says that she and her husband thoroughly enjoyed "arguing about who'd press the button." And Ronald Greider, a freelance writer, says he "broke a lot of important appointments so I could be here when the show was on."

4. "What's on this afternoon?" he asked, tiredly.

"Well, this is a play comes on the wall-to-wall circuit in ten minutes. They mailed me my part this morning. I sent in some boxtops. They write the script with one part missing. It's a new idea. The homemaker, that's me, is the missing part. When it comes time for the missing lines, they all look at me out of the three walls and I say the lines. Here, for instance, the man says, 'What do you think of this whole idea, Helen?'. And he looks at me sitting here center stage, see, and I say—." She paused and ran her finger under a line on the script. 'I think that's fine!' And then they go on with the play until he says, 'Do you agree to that, Helen?' and I say, 'I sure do'. Isn't that fun, Guy?" He stood in the hall looking at her. "It's sure fun," she said.

"What's the play about?"

"I just told you. There are these people named Bob and Ruth and Helen."

"Oh."

"It's really fun. It'll be even more fun when we can afford to have the fourth wall installed. How long do you figure before we save up and get the fourth wall torn out and a fourth wall-TV put in? It's only two thousand dollars."

"That's one-third of my yearly pay."

"It's only two thousand dollars," she replied. "And I should think you'd consider me sometimes. If we had a fourth wall, why it'd be just like this room wasn't ours at all, but all kinds of exotic people's rooms. We could do without a few things."



Proposal for QUBE confronts the pretense of the participatory cable system, QUBE, in Columbus, Ohio. In theory, this two-way system enables customers to interact with their TV. They may respond to questions flashed on the screen by pushing one of the five selection buttons on the QUBE console. D'Agostino's tape is divided into five segments that correspond to those selection buttons, with the intention of letting the audience edit their own version of his art (120 variations are possible). Each of the segments represents some area of the media: text, newspaper, photograph, film clip, and video performance. Particularly ironic is a film clip from *Sherlock, Jr. (The Projectionist)*, where Buster Keaton dreams that he is able to climb right into the silver screen and "participate." Certainly, QUBE encourages this fantasy, but as D'Agostino found, the interaction only operates on the level of a simple-minded game show. In the video segment, Phil Donahue's voice-over explains the QUBE process while increasing numbers of dice are rolled over a photograph of the QUBE console, reinforcing the concept of selection and chance.

D'Agostino's tape also attacks the political issues of feedback and ideology in a media system. He questions the almost sacred McLuhanesque canon that maintains video is automatically "participatory." His accompanying installation of black and white cubes offers various "Quotes from QUBE," the press release version of the system's function, and "Quotes to QUBE," the limitations that D'Agostino has encountered. Although he was encouraged by QUBE to do his "proposal," bureaucratic red tape and delay prevented it from being aired.

Excerpted from: "In the Interest of Conflict" by Hunter Drohojowska, *Artweek*, September 26, 1979

Proposal for QUBE

Installations

Ohio State University, Sullivant Gallery, Columbus,
October-November, 1978

Long Beach Museum of Art, Long Beach, September-November, 1979

Screenings

Artists Space, New York, November, 1978

Santa Barbara Museum of Art and Contemporary Arts Forum,
Santa Barbara, March, 1979

Video Free America, San Francisco, March, 1979

Contemporary Media Study Center, Dayton, April, 1979

Ohio University, Athens, 1979 *Athens Video Festival*, October, 1979

School of the Art Institute of Chicago, March, 1980

University Art Museum, Berkeley, June, 1980

Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art, June, 1980

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Dialogue, September/October, 1978, "Six in Ohio," Susan Doll

Televisions, January, 1979, "QUBE," Kary Shulman and Debra Simeon

New Art Examiner, March, 1979, "Six in Ohio," Gina Franz

Independent Press Telegram, August 26, 1979, "Using Video
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Peter D'Agostino, "Don't Touch . . . Now Don't,"

Hunter Drohojowska

Artweek, September 26, 1979, "In the Interest of Conflict,"

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New West, October 22, 1979, "As Seen on TV"

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Framelines, Winter, 1980, "Athens Festival," Marcy Marzuki

Afterimage, February, 1980, "It's Video . . . at Athens Festival,"

Deirdre Boyle

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Peter D'Agostino

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Proposal for QUBE



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